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ABSTRACT

This study established baseline data on the relationship attitudes and behaviors of entering first-year students. Subjects, 97 male and 178 female entering first-year students at a mid-sized regional mid-Atlantic public university, responded to a relationship questionnaire (for a response rate of 69%). Questions related to specific relationship behaviors were taken from L. P. Rouse's Dominance Motive and Dominance Possessiveness Scales. Results indicated that: (1) the subjects were of the traditional age for entering college and were from families where parents were married; (2) most subjects wanted a committed relationship, had experienced dating relationships, and had used alcohol; (3) women scored higher on dominance motive measure and the measure of physical abuse toward their partner; (4) men were significantly higher on the overall measure of dominance possessiveness; and (5) no significant gender differences existed for physical abuse from their partner. Findings suggest that there are students on university campuses who are at risk for courtship violence and that students bring violent behaviors with them when they arrive. (RS)

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Dating Relationships of Entering Freshmen: A Baseline Study of Courtship Violence

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Courtship violence, identified as the presence of emotional and physical abuse in dating relationships, has been identified as a major concern on college campuses. Dating behaviors such as exaggerated possessiveness and sexually pressuring a dating partner are reported as widespread among college students. Aggressive behaviors range from verbal aggression, pushing and shoving, to actual physical harm. The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to establish baseline data on the relationship attitudes and behaviors of entering first year students and second, to further analyze Rouse's (1990) Dominance Motive and Dominance Possessiveness Scales.

Literature Review

Previous research has indicated that college students have had considerable experience with date violence. Makepeace (1981) reported that one in five students (21%) of his sample was directly involved in some form of courtship violence on at least one occasion and that the majority of students (62%) had known personally someone who had been involved in dating violence. This study was replicated by Matthews (1984) who found that 22% of the students had experienced physical abuse. Other studies have found similiar incidences (Bogal-Albritton, 1985; Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher & Lloyd, 1982). When verbal abuse has been included, the incidence can reach 65% (Laner, 1983).

More recent studies continue to confirm the frequency of college courtship violence. In a sample of 336 undergraduates, 64% reported experiencing dating violence (Marshall & Rose, 1988). Lo and Sporakowski (1989) found that 70% of their sample of 422 students indicated some form of violence during the preceding year. Verbal abuse had been experienced by 56%; Forty-four percent reported verbal and physical abuse. In another study of 129 students, 25% of the women and 32% of the men had experienced verbal abuse, and 25% of the women and 16% of the men had experienced physical abuse (Witt, 1989).

Courtship violence exists at the high school level. Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, and Christopher (1983) reported an equal number of boys and girls experiencing and initiating abuse with first instance occurring at about age 15. In a study of a large California high school, 35.5% experienced some kind of violent behavior during a dating relationship (O'Keefe, Brockpop, & Chew, 1986).

Similar to the college dating experiences, one high school student in 10 reported a direct experience of dating violence and 3 in 10 knew someone who had been involved (Roscoe and Callahan, 1985). The causes of high school and college dating violence (jealousy and alcohol) were simillar while the degree of severity was greatest in the college population. Females in this study were more likely to be the targets of such assaults.

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Date abuse has been associated with violence in the family of origin, disrupted homes, harsh or distant parenting, stress and isolation, early dating, school problems, and alcohol or drug use (Makepeace, 1981; Torrey & Lee, 1987). The Marshall and Rose study (1988) found that 30% of their sample had witnessed parental domestic violence and 76.4% had been abused as children. They found that childhood abuse could predict young adult courtship violence for both the aggressor and the recipient.

Rouse (1990) examined dominance motive, a felt need for control in a relationship, as a predictor of abusive relationships. The purpose of her study was to develop a dominance motive measure that would be reliable and valid. She concluded that this concept can be useful in identifying those more at risk for expression of physical violence.

Method

Relationship questionnaires were distributed to 400 entering first year students at a mid-sized regional Mid-Atlantic public university. Surveys were distributed during the first residence hall floor orientation meeting in a male and a female residence hall; surveys were anonymously returned to the resident assistants. Questions related to specific relationship behaviors (dominance motive, dominance possessiveness and physical abuse) were taken from the Rouse (1990) study. In addition, students were also asked what

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relationship skills they would be interested in learning as part of a discussion group.

Results

Surveys were returned by 275 students (97 men and 178 women) representing a 68.75 rate of return. Mean age was 17.9; the majority were never married (253) and described their hometowns as rural (120) or suburban (101). The majority were Caucasian as is 95% of the campus. The majority of their parents were married (221).

All but 8 students had had prior dating experience. The age range for first dating was 11 to 19; the mean was 14.7 with a sd of 1.36. Most students (171 yes; 98 no) reported drinking alcohol. The age range for first drinking was 11 to 18. The mean age for first drinking was 15.4 with a sd of 1.33.

Scores for the dominance motive, dominance possessivenss, physical abuse towards partner, and physical abuse received from partner were computed. Dominance motive referred to the need for control in a relationship and dominance possessiveness referred to the need to exclusively possess the partner. Physical abuse was computed from six items ranging from threatening and pushing/shoving to inflicting actual injury (Rouse, 1990).

Results of t-tests indicated gender differences in the dominance motive, dominance possessiveness, and physical abuse scores. Women scored significantly higher on the dominance motive measure. Furthermore, women reported higher

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scores on the measure of physical abuse towards their partners. Men were significantly higher on the overall measure of dominance possessiveness. No significant gender differences existed for physical abuse received from partner.

Pearson correlations indicated a number of interesting relationships. Physical abuse was moderately correlated with dominance possessiveness (.46), and a weak negative correlation existed with dominance motive (-.18). However, a strong correlation occurred between physical abuse received from partner and physical abuse towrds partner (.82).

Stepwise multiple regression was used to determine which variables predicted the scores for dominance motive, dominance possessiveness, and physical abuse given to and received from partners. The equation for dominance motive was not significant. Gender and physical abuse received predicted the physical abuse given score (adjusted R^2=.52). Physical abuse received also predicted the total dominance possessiveness score (adjusted R^2 =.13). No other variables entered the equation.

Rouse (1990) indicated through principal components analysis that neither the dominance motive or the dominance possessiveness measures were unidimensional. Results were similar in this study. One useful factor was identified on the dominance motive measure: an acting out factor which included items relating to open and more physical

demonstrations of the use of force. Two factors centered on single items. One related to the need for control, and the other to allowing the partner to have the last word in an argument.

Principal components analysis of the entire dominance possessiveness scale indicated similar results. One factor involved greater use of more dramatic and physical acting out behaviors. Higher loadings occurred on items such as physically striking, causing injuries, and forced sexual intercourse. A second factor seemed to be explained by behaviors such as monitoring time and discouraging opposite sex friends.

Discussion

Initial analyses of this data indicate support for previous research into abusive courtship behaviors both emotional and physical in college dating relationships. This study was an attempt to assess these abusive behaviors as students arrive on campus. First year students in this sample were traditionally aged, were from families where parents are married, and were primarily from rural or suburban settings. Most of these students have experienced dating relationships and have used alcohol; some for several years. Most students reported a desire for a committed relationship.

Developmental theorists have suggested that college is a time for experimentation and learning about self and relationships. This sample indicates that students have

already been experimenting with relationships and with alcohol before they come to the university. These students do not express a wish for casual dating; instead they want a committed partner. When asked what relationship skills they wished to learn, the greatest number of students wanted to learn how to deal with jealousy and anger. Other requests were for effectively maintaining long-distance relationships and improving communication skills.

The high correlation of abusive behaviors between both partners and the incidence of abusive behaviors generally are cause for concern. Students are at risk. This study indicated that students do not learn these behaviors at the university, but bring them from home along with the stuffed animals and posters for their rooms.

Rouse (1990) postulated that measures of dominance motive and possessiveness could be useful in helping to identify students at greater risk. The results of this study support her findings. Identifiable factors related to acting out physically in a relationship were present in both scales.

Implications

This study confirms that there are students on university campuses who are at risk of courtship violence and that students bring violent behaviors with them when they arrive. Drinking at an early age seems to predict the likelihood of the use of physical violence. Physical, acting-out behaviors are not to one-sided but reciprocated

in some way by the other partner. If one is physically abusive towards a partner, one can expect to recieve abuse from that partner. Women were involved in expressing physically violent behaviors. However, women were recipients of more physically acting-out behaviors than were the men.

Questions for future research include what is the threshold that allows young couples to enter into physical violence and abuse? What are some effective interventions that would help students to learn healthy relationship skills? Students seemed to be asking for help in learning to deal with anger and jealousy. The most numerous requests for relationship skills centered around these themes.

We are concerned that the cycle of abusive relationships may begin very early and that some young people may never experience a non-abusive relationship. This is a serious concern on campus. Universities may need to begin intervention on courtship violence as soon as students arrive.

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